

The Monthly Update

November 2006

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

I am really sorry to tell you that the good people of St. Paul [UM] Church lost their appeal to the Alaska Supreme Court over keeping their church. It is difficult to understand how the justices could have ruled as they did in viewing at this justice issue. Please pray for these good people.

I have a bit of history for you – actually something that is new for me also, but as a native-born Texan, I cannot help but revel in what I had discovered (you know how Texans love to brag):

Following a nineteenth century tradition, most Americans believe that the first American Thanksgiving was a feast that took place on an unremembered date, sometime in the autumn of 1621, at Plymouth Plantation, Massachusetts. In 1620, a group led by separatists from the Church of England heading for Virginia instead landed at modern-day Plymouth, Massachusetts. In the autumn of 1621, they celebrated a three-day Harvest festival with the native Wampanoag people, without whom they would not have survived the winter of 1620. This event was not viewed as a thanksgiving celebration at the time; the colony would not have a Thanksgiving observance until 1623 — and that was a religious observance rather than a feast.

The nineteenth century reinterpretation of the 1621 festival has since become a model for the U.S. version of Thanksgiving, but it was an established tradition before the popularization of the Pilgrim mythology.

The tradition of thanking God for the year's harvest at autumn was already a well-developed practice in Europe during medieval times. In some countries a part of this practice included lighting up bonfires, and dancing and eating so as to be fit for the winter to come.

The first known thanksgiving feast or festival in North America was celebrated by Francisco Vásquez de Coronado and the people he called “Tejas” (members of the Hasinai group of Caddo-speaking Native Americans) on May 23rd, 1541 in Palo Duro Canyon, Texas, to celebrate his expedition's discovery of food supplies. In the sense of a feast in gratitude to God celebrated by Europeans in North America, this has a claim to be the true first North American Thanksgiving. The next was apparently celebrated a quarter-century later on September 8, 1565 in St. Augustine, Florida. When Pedro Menéndez de Avilés landed, he and his men shared a feast with the aboriginal peoples. Later, the aboriginal people called themselves “apple-tangerines” (which may or may not indicate those fruits were on the menu at that “Thanksgiving”). Another candidate for the first true Thanksgiving in territory now part of the United States is the feast that the party of Don Juan de Oñate celebrated April 30, 1598 near the site of San Elizario, Texas with the Manso Indians (Adams and Kendrick).

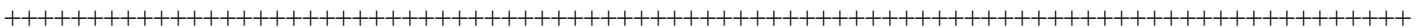
*Thanksgiving is related to Harvest festivals that had long been a traditional holiday in much of Europe. The first known North American celebration of these traditional festivals by Europeans was held in Newfoundland by Martin Frobisher and the Frobisher Expedition to find the Northwest Passage in 1578, and Canadians trace their Thanksgiving to that festival.**

Regardless of when and where the first celebration occurred, those of us here at Concerned Methodists wish each and every one of you a happy Thanksgiving – remembering how very good our Heavenly Father is to each of us.

In His service,

Allen O. Morris,
Executive Director

* From Wikipedia on the internet



November 2006 Update

Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church

Patriotism is easy to understand in America: it means looking out for yourself by looking out for your country.
– Calvin Coolidge.

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Abortion. At its 2006 session, a majority of delegates to the Minnesota Annual Conference approved a resolution to join the state chapter of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), of which the General Board of Church and Society and the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church are members. However, this legislation was challenged with a request for a bishop's ruling of law on whether this action was permissible if there was conflict between RCRC's advocacy and the stands of the United Methodist Social Principles. Minnesota Conference Bishop Sally Dyck ruled that the legislation was permissible and that "RCRC does not conflict with the Social Principles." But according to the denomination's Book of Discipline, before her ruling becomes final, the Judicial Council, meeting in Cincinnati from October 25-28, must review and affirm the decision.

- Mr. John Lomperis, The Institute on Religion and Democracy, e-mail.

The General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM).

Directors of the General Board of Global Ministries heard from Roland Fernandes, treasurer, that the deficit, or gap between operating expenses and operating revenues, for 2005 was \$1.5 million, the lowest level in eight years. He expects the improved financial picture to continue for 2006. The directors, at their Oct. 9-12 meeting, also approved a \$75,000 grant for a series of Muslim-Christian gatherings on peace building in West Africa, the Philippines, Europe, and the United States. Further, the board agreed to continue GBGM's emphasis on global health, including a focus on malaria and HIV/AIDS, with a \$50,000 grant for projects in various African countries.

- Linda Bloom (*UMNS*), as reported in *UMNewscope*, October 20, 2006.

Of Interest.

* *America's Moral Katrina*, by Don Wildmon

[Don Wildmon, an ordained UM pastor, is founder and chairman of the American Family Association (AFA), a pro-family activist group based in Tupelo, Mississippi. This article appears in the October 2006 issue of *AFA Journal*.]

Child pornography arrests have been in the news now nearly every day for the past couple of months. Having been in the battle against pornography for the past 30 years, I cannot remember when there have been so many arrests of individuals charged with either possession of child pornography or molesting children. In the entertainment industry, pornography continues to gain ground, with almost every medium pushing the envelope, trying to out-do what someone else has already gotten away with. Consider the various avenues through which this generation is being assaulted:

- Passing through the channels on TV, the scenes and language are much more explicit than ever before. If the rate of decline continues, it will not be long until we see hard-core pornography on the networks.

While I haven't been to any movies in a couple of years, judging by promos on TV they are much more explicit and raunchier than ever. Restraint and reason are passé.

- Popular music is also getting much more explicit, with studies showing that the more of this music the kids listen to, the more likely they are to abandon the values of their parents.

- A recent report said the amount of alcohol and drugs being used by youth is growing by leaps and bounds, with the age of alcohol and drug use getting younger and younger.

- Abortions continue unabated. We have killed over 40,000,000 of our unborn since 1973.

- With the exception of Fox News, the bias in the news against conservatives and Christians is becoming bolder and bolder.

- Nearly every day we hear of progress being made to legalize homosexual "marriage," with companies such as Ford and Wal-Mart giving their blessings and monetary support to the homosexual agenda.

- In California, a new law now requires Christian and other faith-based colleges and childcare centers that accept students with state financial aid (Cal grants and CalWorks vouchers) to sacrifice their biblical values in hiring and admissions and support transsexuality, bisexuality, and homosexuality. Truth doesn't matter anymore. Only what is politically correct.

Meanwhile, most Americans go on with their day-to-day lives raising children, meeting family needs, working, etc. Millions sit in their houses of worship on Sunday morning, and see no connection with the moral decay around them. The new law in California clearly shows that what is at stake in the culture war is the very survival of Western Civilization -- which came from the mind of Christ. Those whom Bill O'Reilly calls the "progressive secularists" will not be satisfied until all influence of the Christian faith is removed from the public arena. Our religious freedom, which helped make this country the greatest ever known, is being stripped away.

There is a moral Katrina coming, and millions of Americans are ignoring it.

- *AgapePress*, October 17, 2006.

* The Alaska Supreme Court has ruled that a building that once housed the 60-member St. Paul United Methodist congregation is owned by the Alaska Missionary... Almost eight months after the case was argued before the five justices on Jan. 25, the Supreme Court affirmed the decision of Alaska Superior Court Judge Richard Savell to award the disputed property of St. Paul Church to the Alaska Missionary Conference. The five-member state Supreme Court affirmed Oct. 13 the historic "trust provisions" of the United Methodist Church. [Note: We need to keep the good people of this church in our prayers as they do cope with the loss of the church building they built with their own hands and money; in addition they lost claim to a parsonage they had purchased. This is a case of miscarried justice.]

- *UMNS News-in-Brief*, October 20, 2006.

* Lawyers with the Thomas More Law Center presented arguments before a California Appeals Court today in an attempt to keep the cross on Los Angeles County's official seal. A lawsuit by county employee Ernesto Vasquez challenges the government's decision to remove the cross, to excise it after nearly 50 years in use because of a lawsuit threat from the American Civil Liberties Union, which claims the cross's inclusion is a violation of the separation of church and state. Thomas More Law Center trial counsel Robert Muise is condemning the County's two-year-old decision to begin removing all seals that contain the cross from county property. In a statement, Muise said that move by the Los Angeles County officials "conveyed ... disapproval and hostility toward Christianity, in violation of the Establishment Clause." The Law Center also accuses the ACLU of trying systematically to remove all Christian symbols from the public square.

- Ed Thomas, *ApapePress*, October 17, 2006.

* ***Married U.S. Households Hit Lowest Level Ever***

For the first time, traditional marriage has ceased to be the preferred living arrangement in the United States. Seventy-five years ago, married couples accounted for 84 percent of American households. Now they account for just less than half. It appears that when it comes to traditional values, the U.S. is quickly falling in line with western Europe. Marriage rates there have been falling for years. Now, new figures from the U.S. Census Bureau show that for the first time, the number of marriage households in America has fallen below 50 percent.

Out of roughly 111 million family households, more than 14 million were headed by single women, another five million by single men, and a startling 36.7 million belonged to a category described as "non-family households." That is a term analysts say applies primarily to homosexual or heterosexual couples cohabiting out of formal wedlock.

The news service Agence France Presse (AFP) quotes Douglas Besharov of the American Enterprise Institute who says it is difficult for the traditional family to emerge unscathed after three-and-a-half decades of divorce rates reaching 50 percent, and five decades of out-of-wedlock births. "Change is in the air," Besharov said during a recent interview. "The only question is whether it is catastrophic or just evolutionary."

Besharov predicts the social landscape is likely to be dominated for years by cohabitation and temporary relationships. He also sees a move towards a "much more individualistic society" over time. "[W]hat I see is a situation in which people -- especially children -- will be much more isolated, because not only will their parents both be working, but they'll have fewer siblings, fewer cousins, fewer aunts and uncles," he says.

An official with Focus on the Family, reacting to the census findings, tells the New York Times he believes the trend in fewer married couples reflects more of a tendency to delay marriage than it does a rejection of the institution. Steve Watters, director of young adults for the Colorado-based ministry, says the numbers show "a lot of people are experimenting with alternatives" before they marry -- but he admits concern that those who wait "are going to find fewer models" or may find that they have "gotten so good at being single" that it will be difficult to be in a relationship with another person.

Interestingly, the census report indicates significant differences in household composition based on geographic location. For example, married households in one Utah county accounted for almost 70 percent of all households; whereas Manhattan, New York, has a smaller share of married couples than almost anywhere in the country (26 percent). AFP notes that unmarried couples "gravitate" toward big cities (e.g., New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco), but traditionalists are drawn farm states in the Great Plains and rural communities of the Midwest and West. The highest percentages of homosexual couples were found in San Francisco (male couples; almost two percent of all households) and Hampshire County, Massachusetts (female couples; 1.7 percent).

Those demographics coincide with an observation made recently by Family Research Council president Tony Perkins describing what he called the "marriage and fertility gap." In relation to the make-up of the U.S. House of Representatives, Perkins says that "gap" clearly demarcates that Republicans overwhelmingly hail from districts that have high percentages of married people and lots of children; whereas districts represented by Democrats are stocked with more people who have never married and those who have few children.

- By Fred Jackson and Jody Brown, *ApapePress*, October 16, 2006.

* The founder of the Minuteman Project says his organization is considering taking legal action against Columbia University and several other organizations after an angry mob prevented him from making a speech critical of illegal immigration on the New York City campus earlier this month. Jim Gilchrist's October 4 invitation to speak was at the behest of the Columbia Republican Club; however, he was unable to deliver his address because angry protesters stormed the stage, knocking over the podium and forcing Gilchrist to cancel his speech. Also, he notes, during the incident, racial slurs were directed at an African American Minuteman Project member who was present and to whom, the group's founder asserts, the mob "did refer ... several times with the n-word." Attorneys for the Minutemen are considering legal action against the school, Gilchrist says, as he believes "the suppression of the First Amendment freedom of speech was sponsored by the Chicano Caucus and the International Socialist Organization at Columbia University." The activist says he believes those groups, along with Columbia University and "three certain individuals who led the charge to the stage," could end up being charged with a hate crime as a result of this incident.

- Chad Groening, *ApapePress*, October 17, 2006.

Women's Issues. Global Gathering of Women Precedes Methodist Conference

[Note: Read into this "supporting illegal immigrants"] The Women's Division has become a member of the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, which supports local, national, and international organizing and advocacy work. Joining the network is a continuation of the division's exploration of a "priority initiative" on immigration approved last spring. On an international level, division directors this month received a "Lebanon tool kit" to increase awareness of the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. UMW members are being asked to critically evaluate the situation; seek alternate media perspectives on the Middle East; and engage elected national representatives on the impact of the conflict on women, children, and youth.

- *UMNewscope*, October 20, 2006

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Life without liberty is like a body without spirit. – Kahlil Gibran

Global Outlook

Generosity is the flower of justice. – Nathaniel Hawthorne.

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Australia and Islam.

[Summary: the leadership in Australia has in effect told Muslims in their country that if they can't bring themselves fully under Australian law, they need to "clear out" of the country. This is advice that other countries would do well to follow.]

Australian prime minister John Howard held a two-hour summit with moderate Muslim leaders in Canberra to work on a national strategy for addressing intolerance and the promotion of violence, during which issues such as the curriculum of Islamic schools and suggested measures for vetting imams were discussed. The *Christian Science Monitor* noted of the event: As other governments have found, however, deciding who represents the Muslim community can be a delicate matter. Large sections of the youth, as well as conservative and more critical clerics, have been left out of Howard's summit — meaning some of the government's more aggressive proposals may meet resistance. But the groups who attended the meeting hailed it as a successful first step in an ongoing dialogue.

"It's much worse for us now, because 7/7 [when the subway in London was bombed] showed the world that the enemy is to be found within" instead of 9/11 when the terrorists were all foreigners [said the spokesperson for Lebanese Muslims in Australia]. "Now they are suspicious of all of us, and it's very serious, but the prime minister is only playing politics."

But some Muslims here have a growing sense that they are being defined within the media by the voices of the extremists, and that an intervention by the government and moderate Muslims to counter such elements would be useful. This might sit well with recent calls from ordinary Australians asking Muslims to assimilate. But Chabaan Omran [a senior member of the Federation of Australian Students and Youth, an organization that gives religious advice and teaching to young people] is worried about the connotations of the word "assimilate," and talks more of "positive integration without undermining our religion."

Prime Minister Howard also publicly announced his intent to have Australian intelligence agencies target mosques and Islamic schools in an effort to "stamp out homegrown terrorism and extremists". Prime Minister John Howard said on top of trying to promote Australian values in Islamic schools, the Government would monitor what was said in certain schools and mosques to ensure they did not foster terrorism.

Asked whether he was prepared to "get inside" mosques and schools to ensure there was no support for terrorism, Mr Howard was blunt. "Yes, to the extent necessary," Mr Howard told Southern Cross radio. "I have no desire and nor is it the Government's intention to interfere in any way with the freedom or practice of religion. We have a right to know whether there is, within any section of the Islamic community, a preaching of the virtues of terrorism, whether any comfort or harbour is given to terrorism within that community."

The issue of the integration of Muslims into Australian society prompted controversial remarks by some Australian cabinet ministers, such as Treasurer Peter Costello [considered to be the next candidate for Prime Minister] on the *Lateline* television news program on 23 August 2005 [summarized]:

“What I've said is that this is a country, which is founded on a democracy. According to our Constitution, we have a secular state. Our laws are made by the Australian Parliament. If those are not your values, if you want a country which has Sharia law or a theocratic state, then Australia is not for you. This is not the kind of country where you would feel comfortable if you were opposed to democracy, parliamentary law, independent courts and so I would say to people who don't feel comfortable with those values there might be other countries where they'd feel more comfortable with their own values or beliefs....there are some clerics who have been quoted as saying they recognise two laws. They recognise Australian law and Sharia law. There's only one law in Australia, it's the Australian law. For those coming to Australia, I think we ought to be very clear about that. We expect them to recognise only one law and to observe it.

Now, for those who are born in Australia, I'd make the same point. This is a country which has a Constitution. Under its Constitution, the state is secular. Under its constitution, the law is made by the parliament. Under its Constitution, it's enforced by the judiciary. These are Australian values and they're not going to change and we would expect people, when they come to Australia or if they are born in Australia, to respect those values...

Essentially, the argument is Australia expects its citizens to abide by core beliefs — democracy, the rule of law, the independent judiciary, independent liberty. You see, Tony, when you come to Australia and you go to take out Australian citizenship you either swear on oath or make an affirmation that you respect Australia's democracy and its values. That's what we ask of people that come to Australia and if they don't, then it's very clear that this is not the country — if they can't live with them — whose values they can't share. Well, there might be another country where their values can be shared.”

- Source: <http://www.snopes.com/politics/religion/australia.asp>

Cuba. Differences in polity and theology among three denominations are causing division at an ecumenical seminary that trains clergy and laypeople in Cuba. A nine-member delegation under the auspices of the United Methodist Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns visited the Methodist Church in Cuba Oct. 7-12 to strengthen relations with the church and its people. During the trip, the delegation learned about the role of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in training theological leaders in Cuba, and the group investigated a schism that has developed at the school since July. The seminary receives support from the United Methodist Church through the Advance for Christ and His Church, a second-mile giving program. - *UMNS News-in-Brief*, October 27, 2006.

North Korea.

"If you believe in God, you go to Heaven when you die. If you don't, you go to North Korea."

- Pastor Lee, a former prisoner of North Korea.

If you've been watching the news, you know President George W. Bush and other world leaders are now working through diplomatic channels to address the North Korean government and its people, led by Communist dictator Kim Jong Il. While we pray for the success of these negotiations and for a just peace agreement, VOM continues to present the only hope for true peace that exists for North Koreans: the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ.

There is a spiritual war taking place in North Korea as our enemy seeks to destroy the souls of North Korea's citizens. Millions have starved to death in the past 10 years. Following "the God of Heaven" is considered treason, punishable by imprisonment or even death.

Caught in the middle of this spiritual battle are our persecuted brothers and sisters, bearers of Light in a terribly dark country.

Much of The Voice of the Martyrs' work in North Korea cannot be discussed publicly. However, we can tell you that we are supporting the spread of the gospel, training leaders in the underground church and providing Scriptures to the people of North Korea. Your financial contributions make this vital work possible.

Please follow the link below to see how you can get involved and for a special offer on Soon Ok Lee's book, *Eyes of the Tailless Animals: Prison Memoirs of a North Korean Woman*. Also posted are links to a recent article by The Voice of the Martyrs and the horrific footage of how North Korea treats its "disobedient" citizens.

For those in bonds,
Tom White, Executive Director

- E-mail received from Voice of the Martyrs. Their website is - <http://www.persecution.com/>

Uganda. *13,500 Ugandan Youths Promise Chastity to Fight AIDS*, by Hilary White

[Note: With all the talk of the AIDS crisis, this country offers a common-sense solution – abstinence.]

KAMPALA, October 4, 2006 (LifeSiteNews.com, with files from New Vision) - Janet Museveni, the wife of the Ugandan president, has congratulated over 13,000 students for embracing chastity at a Kampala rally sponsored by the government as part of its AIDS

prevention program. Mrs. Museveni chastised the international movement to flood the African nations with condoms and encourage young people to have sex outside of marriage. "We are not against condoms but this is not a message for the young children. As a mother, I cannot advise my child to use condoms," she said. Museveni said, "Parents agree with me on this, but there are people who came here and fought our campaigns of abstinence and being faithful to one partner. They used money and shut down some people and confused others. I persisted and Ugandans are seeing the fruits."

Her remarks came at a convention for young people that featured educational conferences, poems, plays and dances, making the connection between premarital sex and the spread of AIDS. Uganda has been one of the few countries in Africa to have significantly reduced its rate of HIV/AIDS after it implemented a homegrown program of abstinence training for young people. The Ugandan program, started by churches in this overwhelmingly Christian nation, was joined by the government and is being spread to other countries. This, despite heavy pressure for a condoms priority approach by international NGO's. 13,564 of the 17,612 young people from 123 schools in attendance made a public commitment to chastity in the program that Museveni said was about to go nationwide. The convention was the culmination of a four month training program for students called the "No Apologies Abstinence Training Curriculum," that is available in seven districts of Uganda.

Uganda's health minister, Dr. Stephen Malinga, also praised the youth at the rally admonishing them not to listen to the pressure to engage in sexual relations outside of marriage. "Be careful about being encouraged to use condoms, those are selling gimmicks," Malinga said. "Condoms have quite a significant failure rate, they are not completely effective. Let nobody tell you young people about condoms and AIDS. Don't be victims of marketing. Let nobody give you a present of condoms during Christmas," he said.

- Received by e-mail.

Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe Nightmare *Christians try to negotiate ministry in southern Africa's most failed state.*

[Note: This is of interest because officials from our denomination, the World Council of Churches, and the National Council of Churches supported Robert Mugabe over and above Methodist bishop Abel Muzorewa. Such ill-advised support needs to be noted and remembered. This political advocacy is still being pursued by paid UM employees.]

It still feels like last night to Newton Mudzingwa. Seven months ago, Mudzingwa, a security guard in an affluent suburb of Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, had a much-appreciated night off-duty. He spent the evening in one of the city's burgeoning slums, in the one-room shack he had rented—with him, his wife, and his two young children crammed into a single bed. It was to be their last night at home together.

Around midnight, the blare of loudspeakers jolted them out of sleep. Police and military officers cheered by President Robert Mugabe's political activists swooped down on the slum to demolish "illegal" structures. Operation Murambastvina (meaning "Drive Out Trash") had begun. Mudzingwa quickly threw together whatever goods he could save. His wife bundled blankets around their children. As temperatures plummeted to biting levels, they rushed outside. The family then watched as bulldozers reduced to rubble the only home the children had ever known.

"All I could ask was: 'Why, God? Why?'" recalls Mudzingwa. The government says that only 700,000 people were relocated and that urban renewal was long overdue. Other reliable estimates put the figure at 1.7 million displaced people. Either way, the Mudzingwas were among tens of thousands of locals suddenly without shelter, proper food, and clean water.

Broken Promise. The "Mugabe tsunami," as African news media have labeled the event, pushed Zimbabwe, a country the size of Montana with a population of 12 million, back onto front pages around the world. U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan rushed top envoy Anna Kajimulo Tibaijuka to begin a fact-finding mission to the former Rhodesia.

On the ground, away from the media, churches located in the slums felt the first brunt of the government's action. Thousands sought help. "Many were coming to churches saying, 'We are desperate,'" says Jethro Dube, a pastor on staff with the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Bulawayo, the country's second-largest city. Churches responded by delivering food, water, and blankets, as well as by housing many of the displaced—at least until they, too, were forcibly moved.

The government put many families into holding camps in remote areas. "The government has been very harsh in dealing with poor people," observes Bulawayo-based Useni Sibanda, program manager of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA). Sibanda witnessed the suffering and death of some in these camps.

Fortunately, through the help of churches and friends, Mudzingwa managed to find safe haven in the country for his wife and children. Mudzingwa remains an "illegal" squatter in an urban building under construction. The government eventually succumbed to local and international pressure and halted the destruction. But by February, the beginning of the rainy season in Zimbabwe, thousands were still living out in the open or under plastic sheets. The government had promised earlier to build 200,000 new homes by the year's end. But the deadline came and went without much being done. Some media reports say the few houses that were constructed crumbled under the first heavy rains.

Many church leaders told CT that restoring order in townships was not the original issue, regardless of what the Mugabe government claimed. "It is the way it was done," explains Tawona Mtshigo, then a church-based activist and now director of the International Bible Society in Zimbabwe. "Was it cleaning up places or people?" she asks.

House of Stone Crumbles. Everything about Zimbabwe nowadays is bleak. Harare is gloomy. Potholes cripple the already rickety public transportation system. Water shortages occur daily. Power outages are frequent and will get worse. The utility company says it needs u.s.\$9 million per month to pay its bills for imported power. People line up for basic necessities—food, gas, medicine—if they can be found, that is. Even cash is scarce. Banks run out. If you can get cash, you need a wheelbarrow to carry it home. Gideon Gono,

the country's reserve bank boss, said inflation would be at 800 percent by March. "We are all millionaires," laughs a trader of foreign currency outside a Harare bus stop. He offers 1 million Zimbabwean dollars for u.s. \$10.

Pessimism reigns. In Mbare, a high-density slum township near Harare, the poverty is glaring. Garbage gathers. Burst sewage pipes gape and spill. Street children roam. Residents struggle to make ends meet by peddling anything and everything. Workers are frustrated. "The government has no clue or strategy to turn around the economy," said Lovemore Matombo, president of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions. But how did Zimbabwe (Shona for house of stone), once paraded as Africa's most promising nation, become a "wasteland" and a "colossal disaster," in the words of Trevor Ncube, a local newspaper publisher?

All fingers point to Mugabe, now 82. The apparent political stagnation (many say degeneration), economic quandary (some say squandering), and general social disorder are all deeply rooted in Mugabe's 25-year rule. Four years ago, Mugabe unexpectedly faced formidable opposition to his reelection.

The Movement for Democratic Change was overtly white-supported. Mugabe said it was "the resurgence of white power." The response was severe. "Gangs armed with axes and pangas [machetes] invaded white-owned farms across the country," said one report. "Government and army trucks were used to transport them to the farms and to keep them supplied with rations once there." The result was that no serious political or economic reform has been possible.

Zimbabwe remains among the world's top-20 most-failed states, according to Foreign Policy magazine, for its weak economy, poor security, ongoing violence, and corruption. As a result, millions are at risk of severe malnutrition for the remainder of 2006.

Call to Prayer. It is a few days before Christmas, and a slender, rather tall man in a blue business suit, carrying a black briefcase, walks through the doors of the once-lavishly appointed Harare International Conference Center. He is here to lead a convention—a prayer convention. He is Alexander Chisango, pastor of a Harare church and chair of the Evangelism and Discipleship Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ)—a member of the World Evangelical Alliance. In 2005, the EFZ called all churches in Zimbabwe to pray for "the restoration of our nation."

As pastors take their seats, a team is already on stage leading worship. The music is a...combination of local choruses in indigenous languages, international contemporary tunes, and traditional hymns. Hands are raised. Knees are bent. Bibles are opened. Floors are paced. Prayer for the nation is on the minds of everyone. The music fades. Chisango takes the pulpit. He does not mince his words. "We pledged ourselves to pray for our nation." He says the plan for the all-day event is prayer. Period. No long sermons. No networking. No coffee breaks. Just prayer for the nation. The need is urgent. We are saying things in our nation are not the way they ought to be," he says. Before long, everyone turns to prayer. Chisango prays in a corner. Listening to the passionate prayer for his country stirs hope. "Lord, bring us to that place where there will be complete restoration to the nation of Zimbabwe."

Chisango is not alone in this fervency for prayer. "Only God can fix this mess," Samuel Manyika says later (to loud applause). A prominent pastor and overseer of 50 churches, Manyika is clad in a casual black outfit, but he commands a strong presence that reveals his standing among his peers. "Zimbabwe's problems can only be solved by God, not by political parties," he reiterates.

The call to pray for Zimbabwe is picking up momentum. In Bulawayo, a monthly interdenominational vigil already attracts 3,000 to 4,000 people. "It is a wake up call—a kairos moment for the churches," says AEA's Sibanda. But Chisango and Manyika hunger for more. Manyika calls for a "no-church Sunday." All church buildings will be closed so that Christians can gather in stadiums to pray. "Forgo one Sunday's offering," he says to his fellow pastors. "We need to saturate our nation in prayer."

Christians in top government positions agree. "God says if we pray, he will heal our land," says Rutendo Wutawunashe, an influential pastor and also vice chair of the nation's Anti-Corruption Commission. "Corruption comes from the heart. We are the only people with the power to change hearts."

Meanwhile, Christians continue to help with immediate needs. When drought and farm invasions caused food shortages, church organizations responded. Christian Care became one of the largest distributors of food....World Vision and the Mennonite Central Committee also delivered relief aid. The United Nations and other international organizations have come to see churches as reliable partners in responding to Zimbabwe's crisis. Senior U.N. executives often prefer to deal with church leaders rather than government officials. "They met with us for an hour," said Sibanda, recalling a high-powered delegation that visited Bulawayo.

Still, pastors and other Christian leaders must walk a tightrope. State security services monitor outspoken religious leaders. Christians say they will not back down from speaking out. "The church cannot keep quiet when evil is being committed," said Bishop Sebastian Bakare of the Anglican diocese of Manicaland. "The church is not against politicians, but against evil and unjust acts."

- By Isaac Phiri, *Christianity Today*, website - 04/28/2006. Isaac Phiri is a journalist based in South Africa. This article first appeared on the *Christianity Today*, website - 04/28/2006. Used by permission of Christianity Today International, Carol Stream, IL 60188.

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"Silent" and "listen" are spelled with the same letters. – Unknown